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ROSE AND SILVER

A PASTEL

BIRGE HARRISON

OWNED BY THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

THE CASE OF THE PASTEL

BY BIRGE HARRISON

IT seems curious in this age of scientific achievement, when such marvelous discoveries are made daily in the realm of exact chemical science, that our artists should display almost no interest in the chemical side of their art, accepting without protest such pigments as the commercial color-man passes out to them; and employing these colors without examination, or any adequate control of their chemical composition—while on the other hand, the great painters of the Italian, Dutch, and Spanish Renaissance, when the science of chemistry was in its mere infancy, were so concerned as to the quality of their materials that it was the rule rather than the exception for each master to maintain a small color-factory in connection with his own studio, where the few pigments employed were compounded under his own eyes with sedulous care as to their

chemical soundness and their enduring quality. Unfortunately for modern art, the results of this widely different attitude on the part of the artists are already very apparent. The works of the sixteenth century artists are still in a perfect state of preservation and are often improved in tonal beauty by the lapse of time, while many a fine canvas of the nineteenth century has already become a hopeless and pathetic ruin.

The medium which has perhaps suffered most as a result of this lax moral and ethical standard of the modern painter is the once beautiful, sound, and admirable pastel. Indeed, the indictment against the pastel as now made and used is really serious, and in the main it is pretty well justified. The principal counts in this indictment may be placed under four heads. First, the colors are said to be

fugitive, fading rapidly under a strong light—this, alas, is very frequently true. Second, the pigment (which is a mere powder) does not adhere to the surface of the canvas or paper to which it is applied. It will therefore dust off, or shake off with the rough handling and jolting which is an inevitable concomitant of modern railway travel, leaving bare spots and patches here and there—this also is too frequently true. Third, in an unfixed pastel the pigment will rub off at the lightest touch of the surface—this again is true. Fourth, in a warm and damp climate pastels are subject to mildew, and the brown mould-spots which result are indelible—a formidable array of demerits surely, and quite sufficient to deter the most courageous buyer from investing in such wares.

But that these demerits are not inherent to the medium itself and are wholly unnecessary is proved by the pastel portraits of Latour, which, after a lapse of two hundred years, are fresher and more brilliant in color, and in a better state of preservation generally than the oil paintings of the same period. The above noted disadvantages therefore are due wholly to careless or dishonest methods of manufacture or to ignorance of the proper technique in the use of the materials.

Having been obliged some years ago to discontinue for a time the use of oil paints owing to a severe attack of lead poisoning, I decided to devote my enforced leisure to a careful study of the chemical composition of pastels and the best technique to be employed in their use. If it were possible to rehabilitate this most delightful and exquisite of mediums and place it once more in the hands of our artists with a clean bill of health, the effort would be well worth while.

As the result of these investigations and studies I was able in a few months' time to overcome every one of the disadvantages above enumerated; and during the past two years I have produced a series of paintings in pastel which are as sound and lasting as the best oil paintings while retaining the exquisite bloom and atmospheric quality which is the distinctive beauty of the pastel, a quality which is due, of course, to its soft, dry, unreflecting surface.

An oil painting, owing to its varnished surface, is a reflecting mirror, with ten thousand little facets, which are due to the uneven texture of the canvas and the corrugations in the pigment. This surface glitter tends to nullify, or at least to reduce, the atmospheric quality of the work. Yet the varnish cannot be dispensed with. It is necessary in order to protect the pigment from change and deterioration and also to give to the colors full glow and brilliancy—for oils have a regrettable tendency to "dry in" and thus veil over and obscure the primal beauty of the color. This can only be restored and permanently maintained by a final coat of the best picture varnish.

Various devices have been tried to overcome this unfortunate effect of the varnish, the absorbent canvas with its uniformly dry surface, the loose technique and broken color of the luminarists, etc., but in no case has the result been entirely satisfactory, and in no case has anything approaching to the atmospheric charm and beauty of the pastel surface been obtained with oil pigments.

The mechanical and chemical composition of the pastel is extremely simple. The materials used are precipitated chalk mixed with the best dry powdered colors in the proportions necessary to produce the various tints desired. This impalpable powder is moistened to the consistency of a thick paste by the addition of an extremely dilute solution of gum tragacanth and water. It is then very thoroughly kneaded, and finally pressed or rolled into sticks of the desired size. If this procedure were always faithfully followed by the manufacturer there would be no danger of fading or of other color changes due to the chemical interaction of the various pigments employed, as so frequently happens in the case of oil colors. This is because in the dry pastel stick each particle of pigment remains separate, while in the oil colors the medium itself brings these particles into intimate contact with one another and thus facilitates the chemical action and reaction.

Unfortunately there is a very much easier and an infinitely cheaper way of making pastels. This is to dip the plain

white sticks of chalk into liquid baths of various brilliant but ephemeral dyes; and as the simple-minded artist too often buys them with no inquiry as to their permanence or their chemical soundness the temptation is great for the color-man to employ this simple and economical method of manufacture. And it is employed by all but a few color-makers of the very first rank. However, by insisting on the best and most reputable makes in purchasing his supplies, the artist may generally avoid this danger. He may eliminate it altogether by making his own pastels as I have myself done for some years past. As several hundred big, fat sticks can easily be rolled in one day, it is possible in a few days' time to prepare enough pigments for a year's hard work upon large canvases. In this way the painter knows exactly what colors are used, and he can control absolutely their soundness and reliability.

The second count in the indictment—that in which the pigment on trial was accused of a tendency to shake off or rub off the surface of the canvas or paper to which it is applied, was not so easy either to disprove or to overcome—and this for the reason apparently that the attempt to “fix” a pastel drawing or painting by means of any one of the many liquid sprays or “fixatives” which have been invented for this purpose deadens the color, and utterly destroys the delicate surface bloom which is the pastel's chief glory.

All of the many varieties of specially prepared pastel papers and canvases were tried, found wanting, and discarded, for the simple reason that they were one and all prepared with a specially roughened surface designed to catch the pigment upon its myriads of *protruding* points—from which the powdery material promptly fell away upon the first really serious shaking or beating which it received—and a serious beating and shaking be it understood is an absolutely necessary test to which any approved pastel surface *must* submit and which it must successfully resist. But the Latour pastels had met the test of centuries in this respect and I felt that it must be possible to duplicate their technique. A careful study revealed

the fact that they were painted upon a somewhat porous paper resembling blotting paper in general consistency, but of a much harder and firmer texture. It was also found that the pastel pigment was *rubbed* into the very pores of the paper and was there held in place by the mechanical pressure and stress of the paper itself, aided somewhat by the gum in the body of the pastel pigment. After much search I discovered a gray paper almost identical to that used by Latour himself, which is still manufactured in France and imported from that country by certain New York color-men. This paper, when treated by the rubbing technique, fully stood the most exacting studio tests, and it has since stood up equally well under the practical test of ten thousand miles of railroad travel, with all the rough handling incidental to a dozen or more large exhibitions. This happy discovery disposed finally and definitely of demerits numbers two and three. Demerit number four, that of the mildew-spot, was one to which even the Latour pastels were occasionally liable. Yet this was the easiest of all to overcome. As all moulds are now known to be bacterial growths, and as the gum in the pastels (with the addition of moisture and warmth) made an ideal culture ground, the cause of the trouble was evident, and in order to eliminate it forever it was only necessary to add a minute quantity of bichloride of mercury to the original gum tragacanth solution.

It will be seen, however, that the above described system presupposes a special manipulation of the color, a firm application and subsequent rubbing in of the pigment with the finger tips in order that every particle of the paper shall be covered and its pores thoroughly filled with the color. The result is a true “painting”—a work which is in no sense akin to that which is so well described in the legend beneath a certain large and somewhat empty canvas which appeared in one of the gay “fakir” exhibitions in New York City some years ago.

“You can bet your bottom dollar

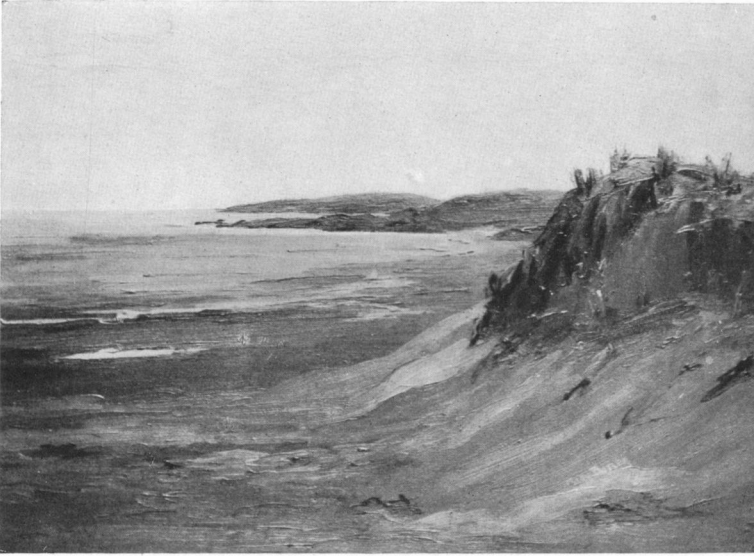
We are on to ‘Tommy’s’ caper;

A *little* paint, a *little* work,

And lots of empty paper! ! !”

In fact a pastel painting made after the method which I have described differs little from an oil painting in general effect save for its exquisite and precious surface "bloom." I have exhibited large pastel paintings of this character in every important oil exhibition in America, and on one occasion was obliged to *insist* that a prospective purchaser be informed that

the picture which he contemplated purchasing was a pastel and not an oil painting. In all cases the juries were doubtless aware of the character of the medium employed but took the sane and reasonable view that in art it is the *appearance* of a work which decides the class to which it belongs, and not its chemical constituents. A wise view truly.



THE DUNE

MARY BUTLER

THE DUNE: OGUNQUIT, MAINE.

ON A PICTURE BY MARY BUTLER

Tufted with ragged wire grass, the dune
Reigns like a monarch on the level sand
Where rocks have crumbled and the long low waves
Creep in upon the land.

Beneath its feet the yellow sands are wet
And gullied into shadow pools; far out the sea
Heaves its pale turquoise bosom while soft clouds
veil
The sky's immensity.

Vastness and peace enwrap the soul about,
Soothing its weariness, as in the desert way
A silken vesture soothes the heat-wracked limbs
Of one who toiled all day.

—O. R. HOWARD THOMSON.